



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Colombia

Colombia – COL40226 – Islam in
Colombia – Muslim Community of
Medellín – Treatment
8 May 2012

1. What is the status of Islam in Colombia?

In September 2011, the US Department of State (USDOS) reported that there are approximately 10,000 Muslims in Colombia, largely concentrated on the Caribbean coast. The USDOS does not report on any restrictions on Islamic religious practices in Colombia. USDOS does make the comment that the Catholic Church retains a privileged position in Colombia, despite the 1991 Constitution mandating the separation of church and state.¹

A 2010 paper, *Islam in Colombia: Between Assimilation and Exclusion*, reports that “[t]he most important [Muslim communities] are those in Maicao, Bogotá, Buenaventura and San Andrés; followed by those in Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, Cartagena, Valledupar Cali and Medellín; and finally those in Pasto, Santa Marta, Pereira, Armenia and Villavicencio”. The author of the paper reports that the Muslim population is growing, primarily due to conversion. Furthermore, Muslim community organisations and groups are increasingly participating in interreligious events:

During this process, the communities have suffered certain changes in their composition. Besides from the heterogeneity of the Muslim immigrants to their country, (that has currently extended to diverse countries of Asia, Africa and even Europe), the dominant group after the Arabs are the converts. Even if it is not possible to speak of massive conversions to Islam, being a country still predominantly catholic, these represent an expansion phenomenon.

The current Muslim communities present adaptations to the national and local context, by way of the immigrants and the converts. The Muslim communities have been concerned with the issues that they share with other social groups in Colombia, evidenced by a growing appearance in the media and in their participation in interreligious events. Definitely, Islam has enriched the already complex Colombian religious sphere.²

¹ US Department of State 2011, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – Colombia*, 13 September, Section 1

² Castellanos, D. 2010, *Islam in Colombia: Between Assimilation and Exclusion*, Florida International University website, 9 April, p.2 http://casgroup.fiu.edu/pages/docs/1411/1270852117_Summary_Islam_in_Colombia.pdf
Accessed 4 May 2012

2. Is there a Muslim community in Medellín?

There is a Muslim community in the city of Medellín³; however, no information was located on its precise size. The locus of the community appears to be the *Centro Cultural Islámico Medellín, Mezquita de Medellín* (Medellín Islamic Cultural Center, Mosque of Medellín).^{4 5}

A 2010 travelogue by Muslims from San Francisco on a journey through Colombia observed that a high proportion of the Medellín Muslim community consisted of people formerly from the Caribbean coast, “some native Pakistanis”, and “native Colombians”. The author(s) make the comment that “[t]he community in Medellín is very active. During our stay here, a Colombian converted to Islam and the next day he brought his wife who was also ready to convert, Alhamdulillah”.⁶ A 2010 article in the *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies* indicates that many of the Muslims of Medellín are descendants of Syrian and Lebanese migrants.⁷

A July 2011 article in the Spanish-language *El Tiempo* reported that fifty places are now reserved for Muslims in Medellín’s Gardens of Faith Cemetery (*el cementerio Jardines de la Fe*), negating the requirement for deceased Muslims to have their remains transported to Bucaramanga or Maicao.⁸

3. Are there any reports of Muslims in Colombia being harassed or harmed?

None of the major human rights non-government organisations (NGOs) in recent years report that Muslims in Colombia are subject to harassment or harm due to their religious beliefs.^{9 10}

^{11 12} The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not include Muslims from Colombia in its most recent (2010) *Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Colombia*.¹³

USDOS’s September 2011 report on religious freedom in Colombia does not indicate that Muslims in Colombia suffer harassment or harm. However, USDOS does state that the Catholic Church in Colombia retains a “privileged status”:

³ Castellanos, D. 2010, *Islam in Colombia: Between Assimilation and Exclusion*, Florida International University website, 9 April, p.2 <http://casgroup.fiu.edu/pages/docs/1411/1270852117_Summary_Islam_in_Colombia.pdf> Accessed 4 May 2012

⁴ Iaccarino, A. 2009, *Muslims in Medellín: Identity on the Margin*, Majalla.org <<http://majalla.blogspot.com.au/2009/06/muslims-in-medellin-identity-on-margin.html>> Accessed 4 May 2012

⁵ Mezquita de Medellín n.d. *Homepage* <<http://sites.google.com/site/mezquitademedellin/>> Accessed 7 May 2012

⁶ San Francisco Group 2010, ‘Islam in Colombia’, *The Islamic Bulletin*, Vol XX, No.25, p.4 <http://www.islamicbulletin.com/newsletters/issue_25/Ramadan_2010.pdf> Accessed 4 May 2012

⁷ Bruckmayr, P. 2010, ‘Syro-Lebanese migration to Colombia, Venezuela and Curacão: From mainly Christian to predominantly Muslim Phenomenon’, *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, EJEPS 3, pp.170-171 <<http://ejeps.fatih.edu.tr/docs/articles/69.pdf>> Accessed 4 May 2012

⁸ ‘Habrà un cementerio musulmán en Medellín’ 2011, *El Tiempo*, 28 July <<http://m.eltiempo.com/colombia/medellin/habr-un-cementerio-musulmn-en-medelln/9426524>> Accessed 4 May 2012

⁹ Amnesty International 2011, *Annual Report – Colombia*, 13 May

¹⁰ Freedom House 2011, *Countries at the Crossroads – Colombia*, 10 November

¹¹ International Federation for Human Rights 2011, *Steadfast in Protest: Annual Report Colombia*, UNHCR Refworld, 25 October <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ea7b3f127.html>> Accessed 18 January 2012

¹² UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2011, *Human Rights and Democracy 2010 – Colombia*, UNHCR Refworld, 31 March <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d99aa86a.html>> Accessed 18 January 2012

¹³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2010, *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Colombia*, 27 May

Although the 1991 constitution mandates separation of church and state, the Catholic Church retains a privileged status. Accession to the 1997 public law agreement is required for non-Catholic groups to minister to military personnel, public hospital patients, and prisoners, and to provide religious instruction in public schools. Muslim and Protestant leaders claimed difficulties in acquiring military chaplain positions and gaining access to prisoners.¹⁴

A 2010 article by Philipp Bruckmayr in the *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies* reports that since the events of 11 September 2011, members of the Syro-Lebanese Muslim communities in Colombia are viewed with greater suspicion, including accusations of links to Middle East terrorist organisations:

These include unsubstantiated charges of alleged money-laundering for the Lebanese Hizbollah as well as of passport forgery for groups such as Hamas and al-Qa'ida leveled against Syro-Lebanese in Maicao.¹⁵

A 2011 paper published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute reports that both al Qaeda and Hezbollah have strong connections with the drug cartels in both Venezuela and Colombia. The report cites Ayman Joumaa, a member of the Medellín drug cartel, as a Sunni Muslim “with deep ties with Shiites in the Hezbollah strongholds of southern Lebanon”. Joumaa was indicted in 2011 on charges of “coordinating shipments of Colombian cocaine to Los Zetas in Mexico for sale in the United States, and laundering the proceeds”.¹⁶

In response to perceptions of links to terrorism and drug smuggling, Bruckmayr writes that members of the Syro-Lebanese Muslims in Medellín “have been emphasizing their desire for mutual peaceful coexistence. The mosque of Medellín (Colombia) has been organizing seminars on Christian-Muslim relations employing priests and philosophers as lecturers”.¹⁷

¹⁴ US Department of State 2011, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010 – Colombia*, 13 September, Section 1

¹⁵ Bruckmayr, P. 2010, ‘Syro-Lebanese migration to Colombia, Venezuela and Curacão: From mainly Christian to predominantly Muslim Phenomenon’, *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, EJEPS 3, p.170 <<http://ejeps.fatih.edu.tr/docs/articles/69.pdf>> Accessed 4 May 2012

¹⁶ Neumann, V. 2011, *The New Nexus of Narcoterrorism: Hezbollah and Venezuela*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, December <<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/2011/201112.neumann.narcoterrorism.pdf>> Accessed 4 May 2012

¹⁷ Bruckmayr, P. 2010, ‘Syro-Lebanese migration to Colombia, Venezuela and Curacão: From mainly Christian to predominantly Muslim Phenomenon’, *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, EJEPS 3, p.171 <<http://ejeps.fatih.edu.tr/docs/articles/69.pdf>> Accessed 4 May 2012

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<http://www.islamicbulletin.com/newsletters/issue_25/Ramadan_2010.pdf> Accessed 4 May 2012.
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